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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
School for American Crafts  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
  
Master of Fine Arts

TO BUILD A HOME

by Gina Zetts

May 15, 2014

**Thesis Title:** To Build a Home

**Student Name:** Gina Zetts

**Thesis Committee Final Approvals**

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DATE: 5/14/2016

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DATE: 5/14/2016

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DATE: 5/14/2016

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DATE: 5/14/2016

## Abstract

This body of work is an exploration of how the spaces we occupy shape us. It's location is focused on the American landscape in an attempt to explore the ideals that have developed within the psyche of the American culture, and what happens to those dreams when expectations do not mirror reality. I am particularly interested in the architecture of socially and geographically vulnerable locations. Places that have been forgotten, ignored, or abandoned because of tragedy or economic failure. Locations that are in liminal states of existence or no longer present at all. These are physical environments that represent our past, present, and possible future. They are embedded within us and shape our sense of being and humanness.

What happens when we do not just lose our sense of home, but we lose the very geographic location that we once knew as home? Can home ever truly be found again once it has been lost? With the urbanization of the globalized world it is hard to ignore the ever more pressing issues surrounding population, social class, energy crisis, and depletion of natural resources. When our economic decisions overshadow our human and cultural needs we risk far more than just losing the building we call home or the streets we know as the place we grew up in. We risk losing our values, morals, history, and even future.

My particular motivation and interest in these themes comes from both my own personal experiences as well as borrowed stories with which I empathize. Born in a Pennsylvania oil refinery town, I am no stranger to the perils of the over-consumption of natural resources. As a former resident of Oakland, California, a socially vibrant city, perpetually in an economically and geographically vulnerable position, I have developed a sensitivity to the unique relationship that a cultural sense of belonging has on the urban psyche and landscape. As a current resident of Rochester, New York, a rustbelt city living in the shadow of the monoliths of its cultural prowess, I have cultivated an appreciation for the historical significance of specific locale and role that memory plays in shaping one's sense of home.



## Experience: The necessity of a home

“The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned. It impels mighty ambitions and dangerous capers. We amass great fortunes at the cost of our souls, or risk our lives... Hoping that by doing these things, home will find us acceptable or failing that, that we will forget our awful yearning for it.” — Maya Angelou<sup>1</sup>

When I look at the derelict oil pumps that spot the pristine landscape of my parent’s backyard and my childhood home I cannot help but feel a sense of nostalgia. The road that I lived on for the first eighteen years of my life was called Derrick Road just outside of the hamlet of Derrick City Pennsylvania where my grandmother was the elementary school cook. Oil rigs, crude storage barrels, pump houses, lease roads, and the smell of the refinery that stretched the length of the valley have all been irrevocably interwoven into my psyche as reminders of home. But these objects also stand as a bittersweet and sometimes even painful reminder of the impact that this industry has had on my home. Blasé end into my childhood memory is that of my parents attending the funeral of a boy only a few years older than my brother who died when a crude storage barrel he was near caught fire and exploded. I also remember many a hushed conversation about the amount of terminal illnesses attributed to the refinery and oil production in and around my hometown. Issues of environmental concern often fall victim to the hope of economic success in places like this, which have little else to offer past the natural resources they were built upon. I am not naive to the fact that Derrick City Pennsylvania may never have existed were it not for that rich strain of crude under its soil, but as soon as it became my family’s home, I also could not help but to hope and want for its future.

When I moved to Oakland California in 2009, I intended for it only to be one of the first of many stops on the adventurous life I planned to lead. The thought of living in the social powder-keg that was “Oakland” both excited and scared me in equal proportions. I was enthralled by the thought that I would be living in a place where, for the first time in my life, as a white female of European decent I would be a clear minority, even a foreigner. What I did not foresee was the intense love and respect that I would very quickly develop for my new found home. I felt pride in my adopted city’s rough-and-tumble image. I discovered that if there could possibly be two places in this world that I was to call home, could there be even more? Was I less of a nomad and more of a collector? Could I be loyal to many homes at once? As a result of this revelation, this body of work is not focused on “home” as a singular concept, but rather, an idea, a memory, a catalyst.

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<sup>1</sup> Angelou, Maya. “All God’s Children Need Traveling Shoes” Little Brown Book Group. 1986

It is in our nature as humans to want for a home, a point of origin to start from and safe place to return at journey's end. When that place or even the sense of that place is lost, we risk becoming lost too. It is places like the one that I grew up in that stir my imagination and sympathies. It is the stories of those places that have been forever lost that call me to make work. To honor the people who lived there, to memorialize them, and to help shed light on what happened in that place so that others might not lose their sense of home under similar circumstances in the future. It is places like my chosen homes that I have gathered and collected, that have shaped me, and will now travel with me as memories and stories that guide this body of work, to honor the very idea of "home" in all of its manifestations.

### *Influences: The place to build a home*

The locations that I have chosen to represent in this body of work are places that I know of through personal experience or have come into contact with through research via the National Trust for Historic Preservation<sup>2</sup>, National Priorities List of Superfund Sites<sup>3</sup>, and the Environmental Protection Agency<sup>4</sup>. They are locations with significant and vital historical relevance to the American ethos that are at risk and in peril. The issues in each pay a special attention to the connection to broader global environmental and cultural issues. Each work takes on a specific location or group of locations that have shared a similar fate. Some of the works represent a singular location while others embody a multitude of places. Each location has been chosen because its story has a universal quality: it could be anyone's home.

Locations such as Centralia, Pennsylvania, Treece, Kansas, and Picher, Oklahoma were once championed as ideal American towns. Places that contained the natural resources responsible for winning World War II through the mining of Coal, Zinc, and other minerals essential to the industries of winning wars.<sup>5</sup> Through the over mining and unsafe environmental practices of obtaining these resources, these towns have become so unsafe that the EPA has named them no longer habitable and all of the government agencies afford to them have been

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<sup>2</sup> Preservation Nation. The Website of the National Trust for Historic Preservation. [www.preservationnation.org](http://www.preservationnation.org)

<sup>3</sup> National Priorities List (NPL). US EPA. [www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/sites/npl/)

<sup>4</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency. [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov)

<sup>5</sup> Enzinna, Wes. "Last Ones Left in a Toxic Kansas Town." The New York Times Magazine. May 16, 2012.

removed such as schools, municipalities, and postal codes. The people who called these places home now face the reality that the place in which they invested their lives in no longer exists. The streets and buildings have crumbled or been bulldozed. The only thing that remains are addresses scrawled on old postcards and envelopes, photos of houses that no longer exist, and fading memories which will die with the last generation of residents.

*Sources: The homes built before*

In building this body of work I have been influenced by social practice artists, Twentieth Century painters, installation artists, and mixed media sculptors. Particular artists who I have found connection with in this body of work include Gordon Matta Clark, Edward Hopper, Do-Ho Suh, Whiting Tennis, and Rachel Whiteread. Much of Gordon Matta Clark's work was centralized around abandoned warehouses, housing projects, and suburban dwellings that he physically altered with power saws. These works "...offered potent commentary on both the decay of the American city and the growing sense that the American dream was evaporating."<sup>6</sup> Similar to Matta Clark's work, Rachel Whiteread deals with the temporal and liminal state of modern urbanity. Whiteread offers both literal and figurative memorials to specific local. Suh's work is less about specificity and far more interested in massiveness of the idea of the collective and the anonymity of shared spaces. Whiteread and Suh both address the emotional aspects of their work through highly contrasting formal manifestations of ordinary space. The materiality of their installations is tantalizing for me as a sculptor. Hopper would often show the formal aspects of his subject matter in a subtle yet highly emotionally charged moment. It is this balance of formal and charged emotion that I find most appealing. Whiting Tennis' work is attractive for its "empathy for the inert" as the artists himself states. "These commingled forms and their ambiguous functions work together in mystifying, timeless objects that seem to be simultaneously relics of the past and helpful contraptions for the future."<sup>7</sup> He creates objects with reference to history or past experience. They embody an innate sense of the lived experience.

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<sup>6</sup>Ouroussoff, Nicolai. "Gordon Matta-Clark: You are the Measure. Timely Lessons From a Rebel, Who Often Created by Destroying" Architecture Review. "Day's End, 1975," Two Chromogenic Color Prints From his Retrospective at the Whitney. Published: March 3, 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Video: Artist Interview Whiting Tennis on the Unconscious Line. Tang Teaching Museum. Skidmore Collage. Published: September 27, 2011. [www.tang.skidmore.edu](http://www.tang.skidmore.edu)

The true sophistication of all five of these artists is how they tell the story through a simple moment of uncanny experience. The influence that I have drawn from aspects of each of these artists are shown in this body of work through material choice and sensitivity, approach to subject matter, and creating visually edited narrative objects. From cast glass mice to lamp worked clovers, I strive to make the viewer sympathize with and humanize these small creatures and plants, to allow the viewer to see them self as the hero of the story. The protector of these vulnerable objects.

*Symbolism: The materials to build a home*

“Perhaps home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”

— James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*<sup>8</sup>

Developing a visual language is essential to every artistic practice. Art itself is a form of language, but it is up to the individual artist to choose the particulars of that language. My personal visual language is centered on imagery and objects that have an innate intrinsic value to members of modern western culture. These are objects that manifest themselves in simple forms such as tea cups, wooden chairs, compasses, suitcases and clovers. These ordinary images are used to create an experience of transcendence. I strive to sensitize the viewer to these objects and the places they represent. These are locations which are in peril. They create a social narrative about loss and longing. Ordinary objects used as moments of reflection on place and time, space and location. These are liminal spaces, places of transition, waiting, and not knowing.

Glass is an almost universal indicator of fragility. It is simultaneously common and preciously cherished. It readily evokes feelings of nostalgia as well as a sense of loss. I have chosen the medium of glass as the central material in this body of work because of these inherent qualities. It is a charged material, present in our universal psyche drawing us to think of ideas about fragility and preciousness. Although glass is the central material in this body of work, it is not the only material that has been used. Vintage linens and luggage hold a powerful narrative quality having already been embodied with a previous history. The recreation of actual historical objects such as tea cups and an old farmhouse chair remove those objects from their

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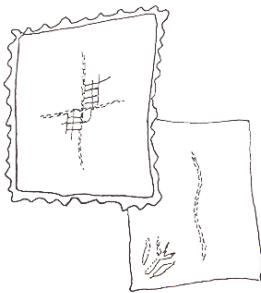
<sup>8</sup> Baldwin, James. “Giovanni’s Room.” Random House Publishing Group. 1956. 2000.

former context and place them as recognizable, yet somehow foreign objects far from their former lives. The use of embroidery, pencil drawings, and other traditional craft methods become important tools for conveying the story of the work. They are common and relatable modes of creating imagery in western society, yet these modes of communication are also quickly becoming nostalgic as technology changes the way we produce goods and communicate stories.

There is a haunting beauty in the simultaneous transparency and physical weight of glass that is unparalleled in any other physical material. These qualities are the reason that I am most drawn to glass casting. Although I use all forms of glass making processes in my work, I tend to rely most heavily on casting. It is a method of working which is heavily informed by traditional sculpting practices, yet utilizes technological innovations. It is a discipline that I appreciate, as it takes a certain amount of time and focus and one needs to follow a certain process. There is an honor in discipline that I am interested in. Like the level of research necessary in the development of this work, the physical technique matching that conceptual element is a necessary factor in helping the viewer to draw connection and desire to further invest in the concept of the work.

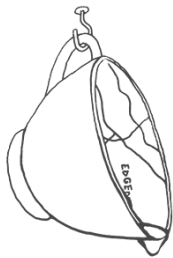
### *Materials and Process: Building the home*

Through the material of glass and other found and fabricated elements, I have explored locations through narrative objects and physical representations. Telling the story of these places and the people who call them home.



In "point of origin," I researched Environmental Protection Agency "ghost towns," places that have been abandoned or more often forcibly evacuated because of environmental impacts from mining for natural resources. Some of these locations took more extensive research, but others came to me very easily. They came with stories and legends and local folklore. These places still exist in stories because the people who once called them home long for them not to be forgotten. They long for their history to be remembered, valued, and learned from even long after the last bulldozer has demolished the last street sign. In this work I embroidered each of these towns as they exist today in 2013 on Google Maps in white

thread stained with colored charcoals and inert chemicals onto white handkerchiefs sourced from local thrift stores and antiques malls (Figure 2). The unknown origin of the handkerchiefs were important to me because I wanted objects which were already imbued with a previous history, but were now being appropriated for some other use. The white thread that has been stained, like the other white elements in this work serves as both a reverent memorial and as a nod to the absence of these locations.



A sister piece to “Point of Origin,” “Non-Potable” pays homage to communities that have been identified by the EPA as having toxic water sources caused by controversial industrial practices. The original tea cup that I molded and cast in multiples, was found at a thrift store with no makers mark or indication of its origin. I chose its depression era style mostly for my instinctual connection to it, but also because of its familiar domestic feel. The clear resin that lingers in the bottom of the cup, a nondescript liquid, was presumably once poured hot with the intention of nourishing and comforting its recipient. Instead, the now cold lifeless liquid stands only to reflect the sense of loss felt by the communities which have been scrawled onto the inside wall of the cup using black enamel.



“Kalamazoo, MI” is a memorial to the largest inland pipeline oil spill which happened in July of 2010 when a pipeline carrying diluted bitumen (dilbit), a heavy crude oil from Canada's Athabasca oil sands, burst and spilled into the Talmadge Creek, a tributary of the Kalamazoo River<sup>9</sup>. Enbridge, the company responsible for the spill, initially reported the pipeline break released 819,000 gallons of crude. It later revised that amount to 843,000 gallons. As of May 2013, Enbridge estimated the company had recovered 1.15 million gallons of oil from the Kalamazoo River. As of the creation of this piece, a thirty-five mile stretch of the Kalamazoo river is still under the protection of the EPA and is currently undergoing cleanup efforts<sup>10</sup>. My personal interest in telling the story of this place comes not only from the sheer magnitude of the disaster and company's effort to cover it up, but also from the understanding that this effected community gained no direct benefit from the pipeline which runs under its soil. The communities which stand to lose the most from long distance crude oil

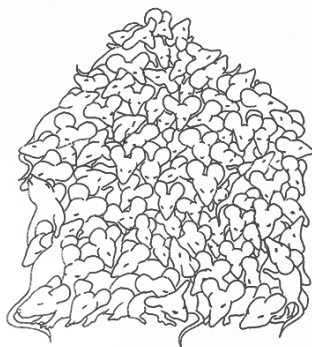
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<sup>9</sup> Smith, Lindsey. “Kalamazoo River Oil Spill.” Michigan Radio. News for Michigan. Part of the NPR Digital Network. February 18, 2014. [www.michiganradio.org](http://www.michiganradio.org)

<sup>10</sup> “EPA's Response to the Enbridge Oil Spill in Michigan.” [www.epa.gov/enbridgespill/](http://www.epa.gov/enbridgespill/)

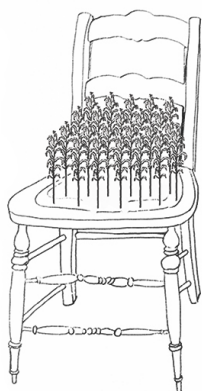
pipelines often do not see any of the profits from those ventures. They are simply an indiscriminate point on a map which sits between a resource and its intended destination during business meetings and planning committees.

The imagery used in this piece is that of a brass frame bed with clovers covering it. I have chosen to use the imagery of the bed because for me, there is no better representation of home, comfort, and identity. It is the place where we are conceived, spend a huge percentage of our life in sleep and dreaming, it comforts us in illness, provides us with pleasure and respite, and is often the last place we exist in before our death. The reality of what happened in the Kalamazoo River offered its victims the imagery of a nightmare. Thick black sludge oozing out of the earth, covering once lush riverbanks and natural refuges.



"The mice are jeweled" is a piece about cycles of deterioration and redevelopment in urban environments. It is a solid cast object made from over one hundred individually sculpted wax mice (Figure 1). Mice are social creatures who congregate in populations drawing comparison to the challenges of urbanization. The title of this piece came from a conversation with Isabel Toledo, a Midtown Manhattan based fashion designer. It is a tongue and cheek commentary on the view among commercial urban developers that mice represent potential value. They are an opportunity, for better or worse, for gentrification. The concepts explored in this piece have been influenced by the work of Gorton Matta Clark. I am interested in the Urbanist artists of the 1970's primarily working in and around New York City. the urban revival of that began in the 1970's is the precursor to current issues of gentrification that have been galvanized by wit driven urban artists such as Banksy and Whiting Tennis today.

In the piece "Modified Consumption" I had an antique farmhouse style chair, 3D scanned and milled out of wood, at twice life size. The caned seat was replaced with a cast glass base and lamp worked glass cornstalks. The imagery of a corn field conjures many emotions for Americans, it symbolizes independence, self-reliance, and providing for the common good. The small sickly looking corn stalks, which produce no yield act as a reminder of the reality of farming using genetically modified organisms. genetically modified organisms (GMOs) are not only affecting American farming practices but are seeping into all aspects of our daily life and health. The commodification of our food sources will eventually lead to the destruction of the



family farm in the United States. With companies like Monsanto and their subsidiaries developing genetically modified seeds to maximize growth potential and annual yield they are forever changing the way we produce food. The chair is representative of the family farm and the risk that farmers face when buying and growing seed from GMOs. The family farm is quickly becoming a corporate enterprise with little interest in individuals quality of life over collective profit. Companies that participate in this practice are optioning out the future of not only our food sources, but nature as we know it.



The piece “Love Canal” tells the story of the Love Canal neighborhood of Niagara Falls, New York, through five glass postcards submerged in blown glass vessels. This was the first piece created in this body of work. It is the most literal piece in the group. Each postcard was created by scanning five actual historic postcards from Niagara Falls. The images were made into glass powder decals and fired onto the flat glass. The back of the postcards tell the story of what happened at Love Canal starting in 1890 and ending in 2005 (figure 3). After distilling the story down to these five cards, I used a process of image transfer through sandblasting and oil painting to transpose the words into the backs of the cards. The vessels were blown using a turn mold to assure similar size and clarity. The interiors of the vessels are filled with organic and inorganic materials which further illustrate the story. This piece was as much about the visual story as it was about the research and documentation that went into creating the story on the postcards.

## Conclusion

We shape our dreams, values, and expectations in the locations that surround us. These are the places that give us that sense of home, wonder, connection, comfort, or sometimes emptiness and loss. The spaces that we occupy shape our very sense of humanness. When these places fail us, it is indicative of our own weaknesses, imperfections, and fragility. When we experience natural disasters that we consider “acts of god” it is easy to find sympathy for communities in peril, but when those disasters are a result of our own economic pursuits such



as oil spills and chemical contamination it is harder to come to terms with the loss. Rife with feelings of guilt it is easier to brush those communities away as a footnote in the history of our rise as a global power. We are quick to forget that those communities no longer exist because of human choices, often made only as an attempt to gain economic power and wealth.

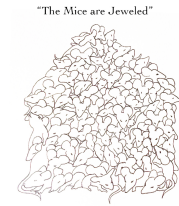
As humans, we are compelled by imagery, as far as we know, are the only creatures that use a language based on created imagery. We believe in the power of these images, they conserve us against the advancement of time, preserve us from death, and protect us from the fear of being forgotten. Images are the very thing by which we remind ourselves that we all share these uniquely human traits, that we are indeed not that different after all.

The images of chairs, suitcases, bed frames, and tea cups act as stand-ins for the individuals involved in each story being told throughout this body of work. They are indicators of time, place, and the condition of these individuals. These objects are charged with histories and personal stories, but also offer the viewer a point of entry into the work. They are objects that could easily be in anyone's kitchen or closet, they are objects from anyone's home. Their intention is to be specific enough to be compelling, yet universal in their empathy and symbolism.

As an artist, I believe that I am challenged with creating objects and experiences that show my audience not only my personal perspective of the topics I choose to work with, but also to offer them an opportunity to become informed and hopefully impassioned through their own interactions. I was once told that "art is a suggestion, not an action." Art is not burdened with offering a solution, but rather an offer of possibilities. It is a catalyst for action. I want to make objects that pose questions and inspire investigation but do not necessarily demand a specific action. These are objects that are compelling, discomforting, and at times uncanny.

## End Notes

Figure 1 - Process photographs from "The Mice Are Jeweled"



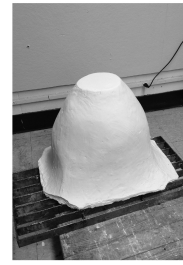
Wax in progress - 9/13



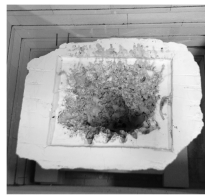
Finished wax - 10/13



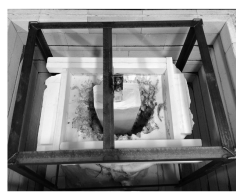
Plaster/Silica Mold - 11/13



Mold Steamed - 11/13



Mold in Kilo - 12/13



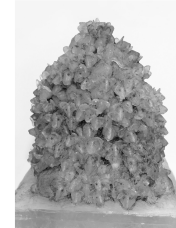
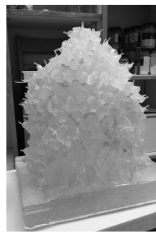
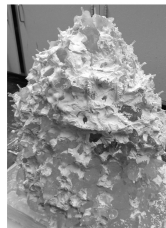
Core and Frame - 12/13



Mold with glass before firing - 12/13



After Firing - 1/14



Process of divesting mold material, cleaning, cobworking, painting - 1/14 - 3/14

Figure 2 - "Point of Origin" stitched map sources from Google Maps



Figure 3 - Text on postcards from "Love Canal"

May 30, 1890, Entrepreneur William T. Love is planning to build a model city along the Niagara River. His pamphlets claim that it will be "The most beautiful in the world." He boasts that the city will house 1 million people, be free of smog-filled skies with beautifully landscaped homes and parks, and that the quality of life will be a cut above even the loveliest urban environments. He has convinced the legislature to build a power-generating canal near Lake Ontario to encourage industrial growth in the area. The construction will begin in 1894 with a hydroelectric power plant which will power his model city.

September 15 1953, Beginning in 1942 The Hooker Electrochemical Company deposited waste into marshland areas of the site known as Love Canal, the location of William Love's failed model city. It is rumored that the company buried over 20,000 tons of toxic chemicals including 200 tons of dioxin on the site over ten years. The Hooker Corporation has recently filled the dumpsite at the canal and sold the land to the city of Niagara Falls Board of Education for 1 dollar. Construction on a new school and playground will begin soon. It will be known as the 99th Street Elementary School. Drainpipes have also been sunk for new homes going up around the area.

August 7 1978, Just two years after the 99th Street Elementary School opened, residual chemicals from the canal began to seep to the surface. The first surface collapse of the dump site in which barrels of chemicals were exposed happened in '74 and by '76 chemicals were seeping into basements of homes in the area. Elementary school students play with ooze bubbling up on the playground. Once the ooze hardens it becomes like a rock, the children pick these up and throw them at hard surfaces where they explode like firecrackers. Strange skin rashes and burns appear on pets and children who walked barefoot in their yards. President Carter has declared the Love Canal neighborhood a state of emergency and provided funds to permanently relocate 239 families.

December 12 1980, Dioxin levels at Love Canal are 100 times higher than previously reported. NY State filed a \$635 million lawsuit against Occidental Petroleum and its subsidiary Hooker Chemical claiming they are responsible for the disaster. In May, the President once again declared a national emergency at Love Canal allowing for the evacuation of all 900 families. Studies reported that 30% of the residents had suffered chromosome damage, increasing risk of cancer, reproductive problems, and genetic defects.

Today the president signed the national Superfund Law to aid cleanup of toxic waste sites as a direct result of the Love Canal disaster.

March 17 2005, Exactly one year since Love Canal was removed from the Superfund list, with the cleanup taking 21 years at a cost close to \$400 million dollars, a study was released by the Center for Health, Environment & Justice. Looking at just four states -- Massachusetts, New York, New Jersey and Michigan -- the study found half a million children attending schools within half a mile of known toxic dumps. Only seven states have laws preventing cities and towns from building schools on or near toxic waste.

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*In Search of Home* (2014) sizes variable  
Cast Glass, Found Suitcases





*The Mice Are Jeweled* (2014) 16.5" x 12.5" x 19"  
Cast Glass, Oil Paint





*Love Canal* (2013) 52" x 11" x 11"  
Blown Glass, Fused Glass, Photo Transfer, Sandblast Transfer, Organic Materials, Found Glass



*The Pursuit of Home* (2013) 6" x 6" x 4"  
Fused Glass, Enamel, Steel, Brass

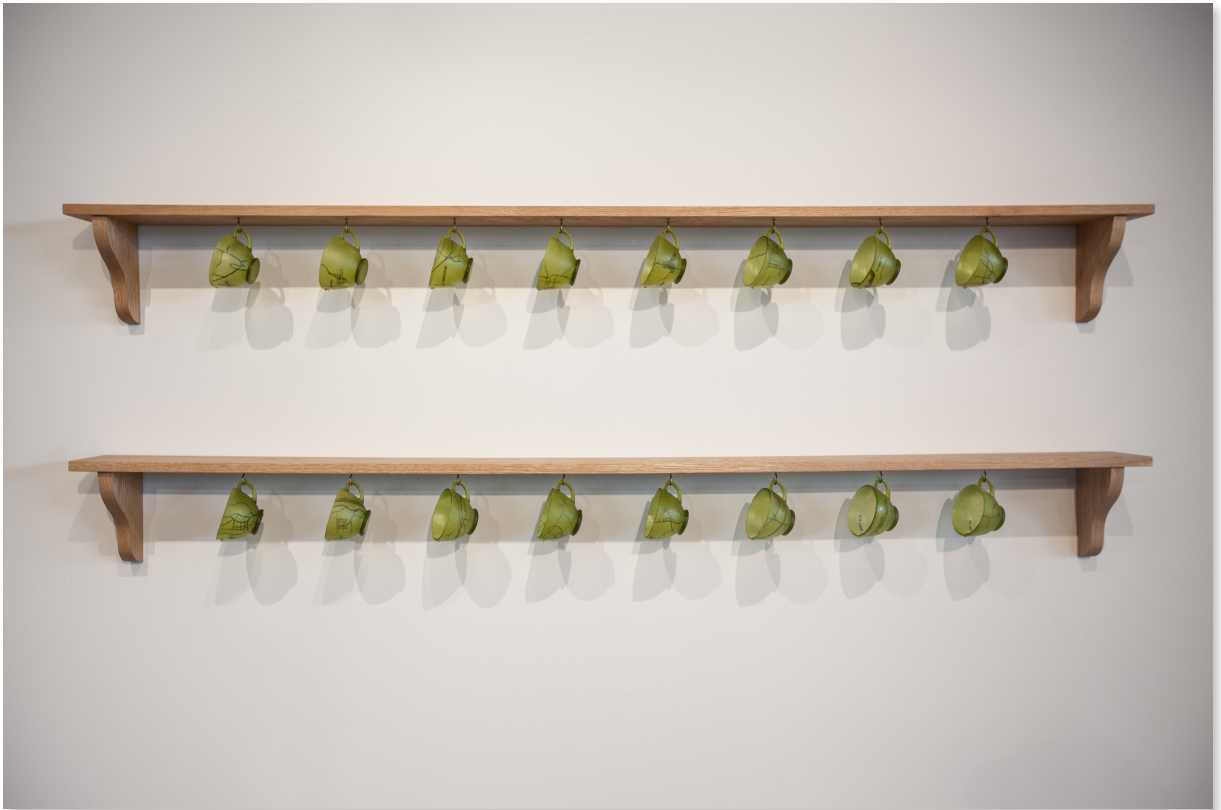


*Kalamazoo MI* (2014) 10" x 9" x 10"  
Lampworked Glass, Fabric, Liquid Brass, Oil Paint





*Point of Origin* (2014) dimensions variable  
Found Handkerchiefs, Thread, Pigment, Brass



Non-Potable (2014)  
Cast Glass, Enamel, Resin, Brass, Oak Shelves



*While He Sleeps* (2014) 5" x 4" x 4"  
Cast Glass, Resin, Oil Paint





*Modified Consumption* (2014) 66" x 32" x 32"  
Lampworked Glass, Cast Glass, Poplar Chair



The Yards Collaborative Art Space  
Public Market, Rochester, New York